

Block Privatization of Air Traffic Controllers

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They guide us to uneventful landings through thunderstorms and terrorist attacks, blizzards and blackouts.

The nation's air traffic controllers aren't praised as heroes or memorialized on postage stamps. They just do their jobs and do them in a way that does not seem in need of a fix.

But, sure enough, a fix is in the works. It started last year when the Bush administration made a push to privatize the nation's air traffic control operations, a conservative dream deferred since Ronald Reagan's successful showdown with the air traffic controllers union two decades ago. First the White House reversed a Clinton-era executive order that deemed the air traffic control system inherently governmental. Then administration officials designated air traffic control to be inherently commercial.

This assumes that the controllers who guided 5,000 planes safely to the ground on Sept. 11, 2001, and who performed similar heroics during last week's blackout should not necessarily work for the public. They should at least some of them be employed instead by companies whose goal is profit.

The idea, explored but then largely abandoned by the Clinton administration, used to be promoted as a solution to congestion and widespread air travel delays. But the 9/11 terrorist attacks reduced air traffic and seem to have shown the value of the current system, run by the government with controllers who work for we, the people.

On 9/11 they proved that there's nobody better or more skilled or more effective, said Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington). So why change it? A majority of the Congress agrees. The House and Senate each passed aviation authorization bills that restricted the administration's ability to privatize control functions the Senate prohibited it altogether. The White House threatened to veto the measure.

Now, Congress does many things in darkness. It prefers working under blackout conditions to all others. When House and Senate conferees met in private, and briefly, the night before the House was going on summer vacation Republican leaders rewrote the measure to allow the possibility of privatization after 2007 at big airports that use radar. But nearly five dozen airports that don't use radar to control planes could be privatized sooner.

Mysteriously, control towers in Alaska were singled out in language that bans them from going private. You see, the state's only congressman, Republican Don Young, happens to chair the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. After years of hearing Alaska lawmakers, including Young, argue that it's not crucial to save the tundra from oil drilling or the Tongass National Forest from timber cutting, it's good to know it's in our national interest to save Alaska's airspace from the grip of corporate greed.

Young's office did not return phone calls. At the Federal Aviation Administration, spokesman Greg Martin says the agency would respectfully have wished that the Alaska towers remain eligible for privatization.

Obviously, Congressman Young views safety as a priority in his area, so much so that he red-lined his airports to be safe from privatization, said Israel, whose district includes Republic Airport name the in Farmingdale, on the target list.

What's good for Alaska may or may not be good for 49 other states. There hasn't been a thorough government study of privatization since 2000, when an inspector general's report on small airports operating with private controllers concluded that safety wasn't compromised, but that the FAA hadn't properly studied the costs and benefits of expanding privatization. And since 9/11, no one has studied the security impact, though a review is under way.

So why do it? Well, maybe for the same reason the Bush administration wants to privatize Medicare, despite the failure of Medicare HMOs. It wants to privatize Social Security, though that would make benefits less secure. Maybe for the same reason it wanted to keep airline baggage security in the same overworked, underpaid, contracted-out, private-sector hands even after the terrorist attacks, and until Congress insisted that the screening system be federalized. Our president runs the most important government in the world, but he just plain doesn't like government.

Maybe lawmakers, when they return, will stand up for what they've already voted for and block the controller idea. If not, at least it's cooler in Alaska.

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